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Religion and Conflict: The Case of Northern Ireland

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An Occasional Paper

**RELIGION AND CONFLICT:
THE CASE OF NORTHERN IRELAND**

by
Padraig O'Malley, *Senior Fellow*

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RELIGION AND CONFLICT: THE CASE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

Now that the peace process, however fragile and tenuous, has stayed the course, despite some serious obstacles and setbacks, and talks between the British government and Sinn Fein are taking place, it is a time to reflect on the nature of the divisions that have scarred our lives and psyches.

One of the most under-researched and least understood aspects of the conflict is the role religious differences play - or do not play.¹ While it is a common practice to label the two communities as "Catholics" and "Protestants," and to keep the tally-roll of the dead according to religious affiliation, it is also commonly acknowledged that these labels are a short-hand way of putting many threads of identity under a convenient umbrella. Not all Catholics are Nationalists, and not all Protestants are Unionists, and no one has seriously suggested that differences in theological beliefs are the root cause of our problems.

But this is not to say that religion should be dismissed. It is well established that one of the many fears Northern Ireland Protestants harbor is the fear of being culturally and religiously absorbed in an all-Ireland state in which they would account for 20% of the population. A state they would vehemently insist on calling a theocratic state.

But beyond that, I will argue in this paper, that religion plays a critical but little understood role in the conflict, one, which, if not acknowledged and addressed, could seriously handicap the prospects for a negotiated settlement.

¹ See John Whyte, *Interpreting Northern Ireland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

I will use the Churches' reactions to the hunger strikes in 1980 and 1981 to explore what the religious dimensions of the problem are, how they manifest themselves, and how they contribute to widening and deepening the divisions among us.² The reason why I will use the hunger strikes as the point of departure to explore the nature of the Churches' role in the conflict is that for the first time since the conflict erupted in the late 1960s, the Churches emerged during the hunger strikes as surrogate spokespersons for their respective constituencies.

The Irish Catholic Church refused to call the hunger strikes suicide. The Protestant churches were unanimously of the opposite opinion: The hunger-strikers, they maintained, were committing suicide, they had earned the censure of their church, and they should be denied burial in sacred ground. The Irish Catholic Church was unmoved, resting its case on its obligation to its community and its duties as pastor.

But this argument was merely the surface manifestation of a more deeply-rooted difference, as much ideological as theological, over the nature of right and wrong and the meaning of ambiguity, that is, in the eyes of Protestants at the heart of Catholic teaching and the root of their distrust of Catholics in general, and of Irish Catholics in particular.

Some background: Until 1976 individuals convicted of "terrorist" type offenses were treated for the most part like political prisoners, under the rubric of what was called "special category status." They lived together in compounds, wore their own clothes, were excused having to do prison work, all of which gave a certain legitimacy to their cause.

However, in the mid-1970s, the British government moved to change all that, by changing the context of the conflict. It sought to redefine the problem in terms of law and order and to label militant Republicans as terrorists, criminals without a political dimension to their actions.

² For different viewpoints of the hunger strikes, see David Beresford, *Ten Men Dead* (London: Grafton Books, 1987); Liam Clarke, *Broadening the Battlefield* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987); Tom Collins, *The Irish Hunger Strike* (Dublin: White Island Book Co., 1986); Patrick Bishop and Eamonn Mallie, *The Provisional IRA* (London: Heinemann, 1987); Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991).

Anything suggesting a war was going on was either revamped or replaced. More authority was given to the police, the role of the army was reduced, and the emphasis was put on "normal policing" and "normal police procedures" to deal with a terrorist element that was now regarded as no different than the Red Brigade or the Bader-Meinhoff gang.

Internment was abandoned in 1976 for a new policy. Henceforth, suspected terrorists would be dealt with through the criminal court system: the one judge, no-jury Diplock courts, introduced in 1973. There would be no more special category status for persons convicted of so-called political-type offenses. Anybody convicted after March 1st 1976 would be treated as an ordinary criminal, would be confined to a cell, be required to do prison work, and most humiliating of all, have to wear prison clothing, the badge of the common criminal.

From the beginning, the prisoners would have no part of the new policy. They refused to wear prison clothing, and were confined to cells, having to cover themselves with the only thing available: the blanket for their beds.

In time, the "blanket" protest became the "no-wash" protest, then the "no slop-out" protest, and finally the "dirty" protest. Prisoners smeared their excrement on the walls, floors, and ceilings of their cells. And when that didn't work, seven prisoners embarked on a hunger strike in October 1980, vowing to fast to their deaths until the British government acceded to their demand for the restoration of special category status. The hunger strike lasted fifty-three days, ending a week before Christmas, when the prisoners announced that they were satisfied that the government was prepared to meet the substance of their demands.

But the government had not, hence the hunger strike Bobby Sands began on 1st March 1981, and the ones that followed. Over a three month period, ten hunger strikers died, their deaths coming staccato-like in clusters of twos and threes, and for each hunger striker who died, another prisoner stepped forward to take his place.

In July 1978, at the height of the Dirty Protest, Cardinal Tomos O'Fiaich visited the Maze/Long Kesh prison. The stench of the dry human excrement caked on the cell walls, the sight of the protesting prisoners - unkempt, and half naked, long-haired and swollen eyed, bone-thin and malnourished, confined animal-like, to their empty filthy cells - and their tales of the beatings, routine humiliations, and degrading searches to which they were subjected made him furious.

Following the visit, O'Fiaich issued a harsh statement in which he expressed his shock at what he called, "*the inhuman conditions*" prevailing in the prison. He condemned the authorities for the way in which the prisoners were being treated and argued forcefully that the prisoners were indeed special, and that they were, therefore, entitled to special treatment.³

The cardinal's statement created an uproar, drawing a furious, ill-tempered response from the Northern Ireland Office (NIO), and hostile reactions from the Protestant churches.

Among the more fundamentalist Protestant sects, the cardinal's statement laid to rest whatever lingering doubts they may have had regarding the relationship between the Catholic Church and the IRA: the cardinal, they insisted was a surrogate spokesperson for the IRA, notwithstanding his repeated disclaimers on the use of physical force. "*The church of Rome is to blame for the hunger strikes*" Ian Paisley's *Protestant Telegraph* thundered, "*Rome has unleashed the violence on our streets once again. The Church of Rome today is no different from the Church of the Inquisition. The Church of Rome is a cruel institution prepared to spill the blood of thousands in order to achieve power.*"

The Irish Council of Churches - which represents all of the mainstream Protestant churches, North and South - weighed in with its own report. "*The churches*" it said "*are emphatic that there are no people in Northern Ireland prisons who are there for their political opinions or for reasons of conscience.*" Therefore, "*any reintroduction of special category*

³Cardinal O' Fiaich's statement was issued after his visit to the Maze/Long Kesh prison on 30 July 1978. The full text and the British government's appear in U.S. Congress, Northern Ireland: A role for the United States? pp. 93-95.

status would be seen as a defeat for the Government and would give recognition to the claims of the Provisional IRA and other paramilitaries."

Indeed, there was a remarkable concurrence of opinion among Protestant churches of all denominations: in their view the hunger strikes were self-inflicted; if they were pursued to death, they would be suicide and should be condemned by the Catholic Church. The hunger strikes, they insisted, were being carried out on the orders of the IRA; there should be no concessions to the prisoners' demands and little sympathy for them - sympathy should be reserved for their victims.

Perhaps the most cogent explanation of the Protestant perspective is best captured by Victor Griffin, former dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin. *"For the Protestant,"* he says, *"the hunger strikers were committing suicide. The Protestant contrasted this with his own people being shot down. They had no choice at all. And then the Protestant wondered why wasn't the Catholic Church insistent on telling the hunger strikers that they were committing a mortal sin because they were destroying their lives, which were God's lives not theirs, especially since the Catholic Church was always talking about respect for life, reverence for life and how important it is to preserve life at all costs. So the Protestant found it difficult to reconcile the Roman Catholics who were going along with the hunger strikes as a legitimate moral option and at the same time espousing a reverence for life."*⁴

In fact, the Catholic Church's teaching on suicide is sufficiently ambiguous to accommodate theological hair-splitting. After Bobby Sands's death the Irish bishops issued a statement: *"The Church teaches that suicide is a great evil,"* they said. However, they added a caveat: *"There is some dispute,"* they went on *"about whether or not political hunger-striking is suicide, or more precisely, about the circumstances in which it is suicide."* Sands, Bishop Edward Daly of Derry said, implicitly invoking the principle of double-effect, which distinguishes

⁴ Interview with the Right Reverend Victor Griffin, former dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral (Church of Ireland), Dublin (28 December 1988).

between the end willed and the end foreseen but not willed, "*did not intend to bring about his own death*," his death was not suicide.

Much of the differences between the Catholic Church and the mainstream Protestant churches can be traced to their differences on questions relating to the source of ecclesiastical authority.

The Catholic Church adheres to a hierarchical structure of government: You have deacons, priests, bishops, and, at the apex, the pope. Authority rests first with the pope and then with the pope acting in concert with the bishops. The pope has supreme authority, and when he speaks *ex cathedra* on matters of faith and morals, he exercises divine, infallible authority.

The Anglican Church looks to the archbishop of Canterbury not as a pope or supreme ruler but as one among equals, although he occupies a position of considerable esteem. Authority resides in the whole church, with bishops, clergy and laity meeting and acting together in council or synod.

The Presbyterian Church is governed through a series of church courts. Meetings can be held only when the laity are able to attend and participate in decision making.

The Protestant churches see Catholics in terms of the individual's relationships to his or her church: there is the teaching church and the listening church in which the teaching church has an authoritative role in interpreting God's Word to the listening church - that is to say, the laity. On the other hand, the Protestant churches see themselves in terms of the individual's relationship to God.

Catholics, they believe, are bound by the teaching authority of their church embodied in the pope and the bishops, whereas Protestants, they would hold, rely on private judgement. And hence their confusion. For had not the pope himself, the supreme authority, come to Ireland to

say unequivocally that "*murder is murder and must not be called by any other name?*" Had he not called on Bobby Sands to end his hunger strike? Was not the Irish Catholic Church's seeming casuistry on the prison issue, its silence, its failure to censure Catholics who flagrantly disregarded its teachings yet in death sought the solace of its services, somehow abrogations of its responsibilities? Was not its refuge in statements that the hunger strikers' refusal to end their strike, despite the requests of their bishops to do so, an act of good conscience, somehow not quite Catholic, a clever circumvention of the issue, a plain cop-out? In short, the Irish Catholic Church appeared to be allowing the hunger strikers to act as good Protestants - to follow the dictates of their conscience - and Protestants found this unacceptable.

Says Dean Victor Griffin: "*Protestants would say follow your conscience, but where its a clear-cut issue like suicide and there's no doubt about what God's mind is on this subject, you must obey the word of God, and the word of God is that suicide is wrong. Protestants would point to the Irish Catholic Church's position on the matter as one more example of Roman Catholic casuistry, even to the extent of using a Protestant concept such as private judgement to get away with their ambivalence. That's the way a Protestant would look at it.*"⁵

The Protestant churches had no ambivalence about the question of suicide, no caveats, no place for theological niceties. Commenting on reports that the hunger strikers received Holy Communion before beginning their fasts, the *Church of Ireland Gazette* observed that "*if this is so, it destroys the very core of Christianity, a core of attitude to participation in Holy Communion shared by Anglicans and Romans Christians alike.*"

The hunger strikes, they held, were suicide, because it was the intention of the hunger strikers to die, since they had been ordered to do so. The hunger strikes were unjustified, because they were self-inflicted for demands that were themselves unjustified. They were immoral, because they had as their ultimate intention the furtherance of murder and the destruction of the state.

⁵ Ibid.

The differences between the Catholic Church and the Protestant churches on the issue of suicide was symptomatic of more fundamental differences.

The Protestant churches saw the Irish Catholic Church's equivocation on suicide as evidence of a larger equivocation on the question of right and wrong.

"The whole basis of right and wrong is on trial in Northern Ireland today" said Dr. Robin Eames, Anglican primate of All-Ireland, speaking at the funeral of RUC Constable Philip Ellis, who was shot dead on the day Bobby Sands died. "The whole idea of what a society should be is in question."

And in a sermon during the service opening the General Synod of the Church of Ireland, he returned to the theme. *"What the vast majority of ordinary people require of their church is reassurance," he told the assembled churchmen. "Reassurance that there is still virtue in goodness, truth and honesty. That there is a difference, and a fundamental difference between right and wrong. There are too many grey areas in Irish life today, [he went on] areas in which it is difficult to make a clear moral choice. There are too many examples of double-thinking and double-standards."*

Catholicism is perceived by Protestants to be a religion of equivocation, where right and wrong are gradations on a theological curve, weights variously described as venial and mortal on some eschatological scale. The imposition of a church which claims a special authority to interpret and preach the written word of God, is inimical to many Protestants and smacks of perversion to others.

Moreover, the Catholic Church's claim, asserted in the *Directory of Mixed Marriages*, that it alone, *"as distinct from other churches has been endowed with the fullness of the means of salvation,"* and that this fullness implies *"more than simply a greater total of truths and means of grace,"* that it means, in fact, *"that Christ's presence to his followers and Christ's saving work in*

the world find their focal point and their most complete historical expression in the order, faith, and worship of the Catholic Church," is perceived to be a statement of Catholic supremacy, reinforcing the fear of cultural and religious absorption, inspiring the extremism of the ultra-right Protestant sects, which, in turn, sometimes find resonances within the main Protestant churches.

Catholics, in the Protestant perspective, appear to put little premium on truthfulness - dishonesty is assigned to a lesser category of sinfulness, being at best a venial offense, and, therefore, not to be taken very seriously.⁶

"The Roman Catholic Church," says Dr. William Fleming, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, *"divides sins into mortal and venial, whereas the Protestant community doesn't see that as a legitimate division in regard to sins. Venial sins just mean a sort of untruthfulness. Deceptiveness for what's thought to be a good purpose is not a very major sin, whereas the Protestant ethos has been that a man's word should be his bond and that if he says something he means it and will stand by it and will go to any lengths to be a man of his word and a man of honor."*⁷

Northern Protestants believe that Catholics do not say what they mean, that they are profligate with words, *"past masters of the art of innuendo and the half truth,"*⁸ as the Reverend Sydney Callaghan, past president of the Methodist Church in Ireland, put it.

Language itself, despite the fact that it is common to both traditions, is often a barrier to communication, a medium to parade the legitimacy of competing claims or to deny rival claims, especially since many Protestants take the Bible to be the literal word of God and bring a similar literal application of language to their daily lives.

⁶ These excerpts from the Catholic Church's 1983 Directory of Mixed Marriages, are quoted in *Arguments and Disagreements of Irish Presbyterians and Roman Catholics*, published by the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, June 1988.

⁷ Interview with Dr. William Fleming, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (31 December '87).

⁸ Interview with The Reverend Sydney Callaghan, former president of the Methodist Church in Ireland (30 December '87).

*"The Protestant work ethic, the Protestant use of language is very straight up and down," says Dr. Godfrey Brown, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church. "One of the things we reacted against at the time of the Reformation was the spiritualization of Scripture. We believed that there was a plain sense of scripture and that in the words of Jesus our yes should mean yes and our no should mean no. There is a literalism, sometimes an over-literalism, about Protestantism and about Protestant reactions to things political."*⁹

*"Protestants are really puzzled by what they feel is the ambiguous attitude on the part of the Catholic Church and the failure to define concepts in a clear, straight-forward way," says Dean Griffin. "There is much more of what one would call sophistry, casuistry in the Roman Catholic attitude to honesty. Protestants generally find that Catholic concepts of right and wrong and truth and honesty are more complicated than their own. Honesty and truth and right and wrong have a rather simplistic, straightforward, uncomplicated meaning for Protestants, and Protestants sometimes find it very difficult to understand the sophistry, the playing with words which we got when the hunger strikes were on."*¹⁰

Language in the two communities has been used to develop rival systems of labeling. Particular words have become what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre describes as a means of *"naming for,"* instruments of *"identification for those who share the same beliefs, the same justifications of legitimate authority, and so on. The institutions of naming embody and express the shared viewpoint of the community, and characteristically its shared traditions of belief and inquiry.... There may be rival systems of naming, where there are rival communities and traditions, so that to use a name is at once to make a claim about political and social legitimacy and to deny a rival claim."*¹¹

⁹ Interview with Dr. Godfrey Brown, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (5 January '88).

¹⁰ Interview with the Right Reverend Victor Griffin.

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

A few examples: It is Londonderry to Protestants, Derry to Catholics; the Maze to Protestants, Long Kesh to Catholics; Northern Ireland to Protestants, the Six Counties or the North of Ireland to Catholics; Toombridge to Protestants, Toom to Catholics. The Free State to republicans, the South or the Republic to nationalists.

Although both communities share a common first language, they both need what MacIntyre calls "a second first language" - a common idiom that will allow them to articulate shared values and overlapping aspirations without having to submit them to the litmus test of mutually exclusive political legitimacies - if they are ever to explore common ground. *"Finding common ground,"* philosopher Donald Davidson points out, *"is not subsequent to understanding, but a precondition of it."*¹²

Even the concept of common ground means different things to the two communities in Northern Ireland. Again says Dean Griffin: *"The whole idea of society and government and the state is corporate from the traditional Roman Catholic point of view, whereas the Protestant angle is much more private, more individualistic. The common good will generally be thought of by Roman Catholics as a more or less philosophical or theological concept. The Protestant will think of the common good in a very practical kind of way - the maximization of tolerance and the minimization of suffering. Catholics have a different concept of it - it's to help the fabric of the state in a more or less monolithic way."*¹³

The language-in-use embodies in both communities in Northern Ireland, *"different and incompatible catalogues and understandings of the virtues, including justice, or the different and incompatible stock of psychological descriptions of how thinking may generate action."*¹⁴

¹² Donald Davison, quoted in *ibid*.

¹³ Interview with the Right Reverend Victor Griffin.

¹⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *op. cit*.

In addition, thinking itself takes oppositional forms in both communities, and here again, the modes of thinking which inform both communities have their origin in the manner in which theological differences become embedded in cultural traditions and dichotomies.

Peter Mc Lachlan, in a submission to the *Opsahl Commission*, got to the heart of the matter. *"The major conflicts in the world,"* he wrote, *"including ours, all have some kind of religious component."* The religious component, he went on, *"is usually that the thinking process in the culture has been determined to some degree by the theology that operates in each of the cultures."*

In our situation, we inherit two very different theologies - the main difference between them is the pre-Reformation theology of Aquinas, which was deductive in form, and the post-Reformation theology of Calvin and Luther, which was inductive in form." In Northern Ireland, he says, "we have seen how this happens in political life. The SDLP puts down a deductive principle - a general framework - and then never budge from it and there is no movement. The unionists put down a number of similar propositions and never budge from them. The two just pass each other by and no wonder they do not agree."¹⁵

During the hunger strikes, for example, Protestants sensed that Catholics used language to equivocate, to conceal their real intentions. Thus Bishop Edward Daly's statements that the hunger strikes were not morally justifiable but that the hunger strikers' deaths were not suicide implied to Protestants that Catholics did not believe that the hunger strikes were wrong. And again, the *Church of Ireland Gazette* went on the offensive. *"Can the Cardinal,"* it asked *"place his hand on his pectoral and swear that his church under his leadership has been flexible in the matters of mixed marriages and the human rights of minority religious groups within the territorial jurisdiction of his church? Can the Cardinal affirm publicly that he has encouraged*

¹⁵ Submission to the Opsahl Commission quoted in *A Citizens' Inquiry: The Opsahl Report on Northern Ireland*, (ed. Andy Pollak, Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 1993).

the same degree of flexibility of all matters of Roman theology and ethical standards, as he has led and encouraged in the assessment of the morality of the current hunger strikes?"

"Perhaps," it observed wryly in another editorial, "in the agonizing over conscience as pertaining to the hunger strikers, our Roman brethren will gain new insights into the Protestant case for primacy of conscience in matters of family and marriage."

Later it would voice its concerns more bluntly: *"Why was it," it asked, "that a Roman Catholic married to a divorced Protestant cannot receive Holy Communion, yet an ample supply of clergy file through prison gates to make available the same divine facility to bombers, robbers, and intimidators?"*

Protestant sense of the Catholic propensity to use language to conceal their real intentions was especially inflamed after the first Anglo-Irish summit was held in December 1980 between British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Irish Prime Minister Charles Haughey. In a press conference following the summit, Haughey waxed eloquent: *"we set no limits [he said] on what institutions might be brought forward, might be considered, might be designed, might be conceived,"* further meetings would give *"special consideration to the totality of relationships between these islands,"* that *"nothing was out of the question"* that the framework he and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had established *"indicates bringing forward a solution through government-to-government cooperation."* To Protestants it suggested the worst, that the Union itself was in peril.

Thatcher, however, was insistent that no constitutional changes were in the offing, that the Union would not be prejudiced. The different interpretations the two governments put on the post-summit communique, the triumphalist attitude in Dublin suggesting that Unionists had good reason to fear and the paternalistic attitude in London suggesting that Unionists had nothing to fear - on the one side the hint of history in the making, on the other, the assertion of the status-quo - left Protestants more than ever convinced that they were right not to believe a word of what Catholics had to say.

"Once again truth is at stake," said a report by the Presbyterians' governance committee. *"Who is speaking the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?"*

For Northern Ireland Protestants, heavily influenced by Calvinistic Puritanism, right and wrong are not only morally distinguishable, but absolutes, and they bring the same inflexible, no-compromise stance to their attitudes on every issue, and the same distrust of others, especially Catholics, who do not share their rigidity. They mistake their own rigidity for virtue, for standing for principle, for an honesty they are unwilling to impute to others who do not share their unyielding dogmatism.

Two years later, the Reverend Sydney Callaghan warned the *New Ireland Forum*¹⁶ of the consequences of the Catholic penchant for the ambiguous: *"In our Southern ethos,"* he said, *"we play with words. We bandy them about. We throw them about and we know the ball-game. We know that many of them are not to be taken seriously. We live with that ball game; we understand it and we recognize it; it is a built-in recognition. So my Northern friends say: 'Say what you mean, mean what you say, but on the basis of your track record I frankly do not believe a word you politicians utter.'"*

The conduct of the principals when the report of the New Ireland Forum was released in May 1984 is another good example of the Irish Catholic propensity to *"bandy about with words."* No sooner had the report been released than the principals began to bicker among themselves as to what it was they had agreed to.

Each of the party leaders held separate press conferences, disagreeing among themselves in public regarding what it was they had agreed to before the ink had even dried. Charles

¹⁶ In May 1983, the four major constitutional nationalist parties on the island Fianna Fail, Fine Gael, and the Labour Party in the South, and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) in the North came together in the New Ireland Forum to hammer out their vision of a New Ireland.

Haughey insisted that the Forum called for a unitary state; Prime Minister Dr. Garret FitzGerald disagreed; *"The report,"* he said, *"was not a blueprint but an agenda for possible action."*

The people were forgiving. It was, after all, a political document and given the long-standing antipathy between FitzGerald and Haughey, the public was prepared to treat their joint signatures on a document as being more significant than their subsequent disagreements over precisely what it was they had agreed to. After eleven months of deliberations, twenty-eight private sessions, thirteen public sessions, and fifty-six meetings of the four party leaders, the parties to the Forum could not be seen publicly to fail, since this would not only preclude further dialogue among themselves but would almost certainly ensure further decline in the political fortunes of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the party representing about two-thirds of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, which was implacably opposed to the use of violence to further political goals.

What appeared to be an agreed-upon report allowed the parties to go their separate ways. They could always argue that they were only disagreeing on the interpretation of the agreed-upon, not on the question of agreement itself. In short, the Forum report was a peculiarly Irish document, another example of an Irish solution to an Irish problem, reflecting contradiction, ambiguity, dual meanings, a propensity to sidestep unpleasant realities.

In November 1985, eighteen months after the New Ireland Report was published, the British and Irish governments put their signatures to the Anglo-Irish Agreement.¹⁷ The agreement had to be simultaneously capable of accommodating Catholics without permanently alienating Protestants. It had, therefore, to reflect this duality of intent. Thus its ambiguity and malleability; its emphasis on intent rather than fact; its adherence to process rather than specifics; its design as a

¹⁷ The Anglo-Irish Agreement acknowledges for the first time that the Irish government has legitimate rights in Northern Ireland. Under the agreement, the Republic of Ireland has a consultative role in the affairs of Northern Ireland, especially in matters relating to the minority community. To give expression to this consultative role, the two governments set up an inter-governmental, serviced by a full-time secretariat staffed by civil servants from both jurisdictions. The secretariat is jointly chaired by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Irish minister for Foreign Affairs, and the two ministers meet on a regular basis.

framework rather than as a set of provisions. This accounted for a lot of its appeal to Catholics - it was written in a manner they could subscribe to - and to much of the opposition to it among Protestants - they could not understand it. Dublin said the agreement was more than consultative, London said it was not. London said, or at least the then secretary of state said, the agreement ensured the perpetuity of the Union, Dublin said it did not. Dublin implied that the inter-governmental council would retain considerable powers, even in the event of powersharing, London said it would not. London said Dublin had accepted that Northern Ireland was a legitimate part of the United Kingdom, Dublin said it did not, pointing with some pride to the wording of Article 1, which made no reference to the *constitutional status* of Northern Ireland, only to its *status*. Dublin said the agreement called for immediate and far-reaching changes in the administration of justice, London said it did not. London said the agreement could be changed if Unionists engaged in talks, Dublin said it could not. London stressed security aspects, Dublin called attention to its contribution to decision-making.

In the ambience of interpretation and counter-interpretation, Protestants took the only course they knew. They translated the agreement into the language they understood; they cut through the ambiguity, the nuance, the significant omissions, the balance and order of the arrangements it proposed, and got to the heart of the matter: The agreement mandated Dublin Rule.

Perhaps, the most vitriolic example, certainly the most raw, of Protestant reaction to the AIA expressed in a religious context came from the pulpit of the redoubtable Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party and founding moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church. On the Sunday following the signature of the agreement, he addressed the faithful at Martyr's Memorial Church. "*We pray this night,*" he told his congregation, "*that Thou deal with the prime minister of our country [Margaret Thatcher]. We remember that the apostle Paul handed over the enemies of truth to the Devil so that they might learn not to blaspheme. In the name of Thy Blessed self, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, we hand this woman, Margaret Thatcher, over to the Devil that she might learn not to blaspheme ... O God, in wrath take vengeance upon this wicked*

treacherous lying woman, take vengeance upon her, O Lord, and grant that we shall see a demonstration of Thy Power."

Underlying Catholic Ireland's interpretation of the Forum Report and the Anglo-Irish agreement is its attitude towards Protestantism. Catholicism is "right," its values God-given; a united Ireland is historically mandated, a matter of inevitability. Protestants belong to the "wrong" religion; Unionists belong to the "wrong" state. Protestants should be converted to Catholicism, Unionists to an united Ireland. Acknowledgment of Protestant beliefs does not imply acceptance, approval, or concession of their legitimacy. The willingness to allow Protestants their Protestantism does not diminish the obligation Catholics have to get Protestants to see the errors of their ways; the willingness to allow Protestants their Britishness, does not diminish Catholics' obligation to convince them that they are really Irish, or, at the very least, that their long-term interests would be more adequately safeguarded under some all-Ireland umbrella than in a British state.

The usage of language also obfuscates the interpretations of the "Joint Declaration," published in December 1994,¹⁸ and "A New Framework for Agreement," published in March 1995;¹⁹ again both are written in a language more familiar to Catholics than to Protestants. The two documents are peppered with references to "frameworks," "parameters," and spiced with phrases like *"He [the Irish Prime Minister] accepts, on behalf of the Irish Government, that the democratic right of self-determination by the people of Ireland as a whole must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland ..."; "The British government agree that it is for the people of Ireland alone, by*

¹⁸ The Joint Declaration by the prime ministers of Britain and the Republic of Ireland on 15 December 1993, in its own words, "provided from everyone's point of view a noble means of establishing the first step to toward lasting peace and justice in Ireland." It recognizes that the three relationships - between the two traditions in Northern Ireland, between the two parts of Ireland, and between the two Islands - must be addressed with some give and take on both sides.

¹⁹ "A New Framework for Agreement" describes itself as "A shared understanding between the British and Irish Governments to assist discussion and negotiation involving the Northern Ireland parties." Essentially it spells out in more detail the ideas put forward in the Joint Declaration.

agreement between the two parts respectively, to exercise their right of self-determination on the basis of consent, freely and concurrently given, North and South, to bring about a united Ireland, if that is their wish." "He [the Irish Prime Minister] confirms that in the event of an overall political settlement, the Irish Government will, as part of a balanced constitutional accommodation, put forward and support proposals for changes in the Irish Constitution which would fully reflect the principle of consent in Northern Ireland." "...a fair and honourable accommodation can be envisaged...without compromising the essential principles or the long-term aspirations or interests of either tradition or either community"; "Given the absence of consensus and the depth of division between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland, the two Governments agree that such an accommodation will involve an agreed new approach to the traditional constitutional doctrines on both sides."

What has all this to do with the unfolding peace-process in Northern Ireland?

A number of things:

- 1) It argues strongly for transparency in the negotiating process, for openness and the uncamouflaged. The people of Ireland should be made part of the process, so that obstacles that emerge, and they will, can be discussed and clarified in the public domain.
- 2) Catholic negotiators must eschew the fanciful footwork, and recognize that the Protestant propensity for the inductive is an inherent part of their tradition, and must be accepted and respected in that context.
- 3) Every party must recognize, as must both governments, that different communities use language in different ways, and that structures should be put in place that anticipate and defuse the misunderstandings that will arise because of these differences.

4) Progress only comes when negotiating parties learn to start trusting each other. Trust is earned. When one community addresses the other, it must do so with particular sensitivity to the other community's politics. Parties must put themselves in the shoes of their protagonists. They must help their protagonists to bring their communities with them. In the end, successful negotiations are not so much about bringing your community along with you, as helping your protagonists bring their communities along with them. Respect for the others' positions is germane to the whole process.

5) The level of trust that develops among negotiators is a function of their ability to communicate, which, in turn, requires them to develop a common vocabulary, a second-first language.

6) If political consensus is to emerge, then mutual trust and respect, tolerance of others, and a willingness to compromise must exist at all levels in Northern Ireland. In this regard, where there is a transparent absence of trust on each side of the divide, due in part to ingrained cultural differences with regard to language and process - some of which have their origins in religious structures and competing claims to legitimacy that developed over the centuries - a negotiating process that stipulates that *"nothing is agreed until everything is agreed"* sets up a situation more like a poker table than a negotiating table.

The formula that *"nothing is agreed until everything is agreed,"* discourages openness and risk-taking and encourages every side to play their cards close to their chests, making it difficult to create the ambience in which accommodation emerges.

At every level, negotiations should involve the inherent risk of compromise; indeed, compromise is the essential ingredient of negotiations, without which there can be no negotiations. Each compromise is a building block, and as the parties grow to trust each other,

the move from one compromise to the next, with concessions, though difficult, being made on all sides. Each side becomes invested in the process, each develops a stake in seeing the other succeed, a sum of mutual investments develops, which provides the cushion when it comes to the crunch issues.

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2

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5

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